DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 375 UD 017 323

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TITLE	The Linkage Between Research and Practice: The Case of the DTA Project.
INSTITUTION	Center for New Schools, Inc., Chicago, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. School Capacity for Problem Solving Group.
PUB DATE	5 Apr 77
CONTRACT	400-75-0018
NOTE	12p.; For related documents see UD 017 320, UD 017 324-325; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, N.Y., April 5, 1977)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Dissemination; *Information Networks; *Information Utilization; *Problem Solving; Public Schools; Research Methodology; *Research Utilization; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Documentation and Technical Assistance Project

ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to facilitate local problem solving in urban public schools, the Documentation and Technical Assistance Project (DTA) is concerned with clarifying the relationship, or linkage, between research and practice. This paper describes that linkage, which includes two related components: the "definition" of some research knowledge as potentially useful for informing practice; and the "implementation" of the action required to make use of that knowledge. Definition and implementation take place through linkage channels. These consist of individuals acting alone or together, and may be informal or formally designated structures. At this stage in the DTA, informal linkage predominates over formal, though formalization is increasing. Within the linkage channels, people reflect upon information and either reject it as inapplicable, store it for later application, or channel it directly to a school setting. This reflection is a process of translation, an aspect of linkage. Judgments made are based on projected usefulness for solving urban public school problems. From observations of the linkage process, the author concludes that face-to-face (rather than written) communications enhance the perception of research materials as useful. Further, some familiarity (on the part of the researcher) with the research site maximizes usefulness of data collected. In addition, group (rather than individual) communications favor the passing on of useful knowledge. (Author/GC)

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THE LINKAGE BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE:

THE CASE OF THE DTA PROJECT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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UD017323

Presented as part of a symposium on DTA: A New Approach to Linking Research with Practice in Facilitating Local School Problem Solving at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New York City, April 5, 1977.

This paper is part of the Documentation and Technical Assistance Project of the Center for New Schools, 59 East Van Buren Street, Chicago, Illinois and of the Center for Educational Policy and Management, 1472 Kincaid Street, Eugene, Oregon. This Project is funded by the School Capacity for Problem Solving Program of the National Institute of Education, contract #400-75-0018. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect views of that agency.

INTRODUCTION

As part of our effort to understand and support the facilitation of sustained capacity for local problem solving in urban public schools, the Documentation and Technical Assistant Project (DTA) of the Center for New Schools is concerned with elucidating the process whereby research informs practice or does not do so. In working to understand this process we have found that these problematic issues regarding the linkage of research and practice get played out within our project as we go about our work of documentation and technical assistance. Realizing this, we have created an internal Study Team to focus upon the knowledge utilization process within the DTA Project. This paper describes some of the current understandings of the internal Study Team.

In the following pages we will describe the linkage between research and practice that we have observed within our project in terms of three broad categories that are contributing to our development of theory on this issue:

1. Two features of linkage between research and practice.
2. Several channels through which research-based information travels.
3. The complex process by which linkage is facilitated.

Before beginning that discussion, however, we will consider the background of this current work in terms of our research methodology and the location of our work within the broad efforts

to understand knowledge utilization. We will conclude this paper with tentative statements about problems that members of the DTA Project have encountered in the linkage process and brief descriptions of our attempts to solve them.

BACKGROUND

The material presented in this paper is based on observations focused on linkage activities of DTA project members, working with each other and working with practitioners in the field. Data are recorded in field notes which are summarized and partially analyzed on field data forms. Themes or categories of understanding are generated through discussion and further study of field data within the Study Team and with other project members.

Linkage between research and practice is one aspect of a large process described in the research literature as knowledge utilization. Within the DTA Project we define knowledge utilization as the "gathering and organizing of ideas and experiences within and outside of a school system, that is intended for use for improvement of the education process."

In the DTA Project we have a source of knowledge in the results of our extensive documentation of innovative school improvement strategies taking place at nine sites funded by the National Institute for Education for that potentially useful purpose. We also seek to understand the knowledge utilization process through

our documentation of the process by which technical assisters within the DTA Project seek to apply what we have learned from the nine innovative school improvement strategies to other urban public schools which desire assistance.

In documenting the process of linkage between research and practice within the DTA Project, our internal Study Team has noted that the project began to experiment with use of the concepts of linkage and knowledge utilization interchangeably and then later moved to an understanding of linkage as one type of knowledge utilization, the type with which we are primarily concerned.

LINKAGE BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

A. Features of Linkage:

Linkage includes two interrelated components: definition and implementation. The first component is the definition of some research knowledge as potentially useful for informing practice. The component of implementation is composed of the action that is required to make use of that knowledge. In our internal study efforts we are beginning to describe some of the characteristics of the resources which these features of linkage use:

Resources for linkage definition:

factual information)
theoretical information) for which the means of
lore) implementation is not specified

Resources for linkage implementation:
structures that provide access to information
means for information adaptation (formulation, translation, clarification, dissemination),
conduits for communication (speech, writing),
and communication recipients.

Our delineation of these characteristics as resources for the two components of linkage will inform our continuous efforts to build theory and description about our internal process of linkage between research and practice. Linkage definition and implementation take place through alternative channels which will now be described.

B. Linkage Channels:

We have observed how people reflect upon research knowledge they come to possess before they are able to use it. Our observations give us some ideas about the channels through which they go about doing this. Linkage channels vary on at least two dimensions: 1) whether they consist of individuals alone or in greater company and 2) whether they are informal or formally designated structures.

Individual site researchers in the DTA project are often called upon to share their knowledge on specific topics based upon their experience documenting an innovative school improvement strategy in one of the nine sites. Individually, they reflect upon what they have observed and how it might apply in the questioner's circumstance. Site researchers, technical assisters, practitioners,

and others who take part in seminars conducted in the New York office of the DTA Project (see Lenoir, 1977) reflect jointly about the applicability of particular pieces of research knowledge to the solution of problems.

Informal linkage activities are commonly observed in our project offices in Chicago and take place wherever our work is done. For example, Steve Wilson, the DTA Documentation Team Director, and Francis Holliday, the Chicago Region Director, reported to the author a brief chat which they had in the office one day in which they considered the applicability of data about activities at the nine school improvement sites to a particular site in which technical assistance was being given. Among the formal channels, a "linkage committee" was created which is composed of representatives from all parts of the DTA Project. The purpose of the committee is to make decisions about which ideas are thought to be immediately applicable to practice and which should be kept for future reference.

At this state in the project informal linkage predominates over formal. The Study Team has observed project members engaged with each other informally over complex linkage issues. Formalization of linkage is increasing in the project and thus far has followed informal solution of complex issues.

C. Process by which Linkage is Facilitated:

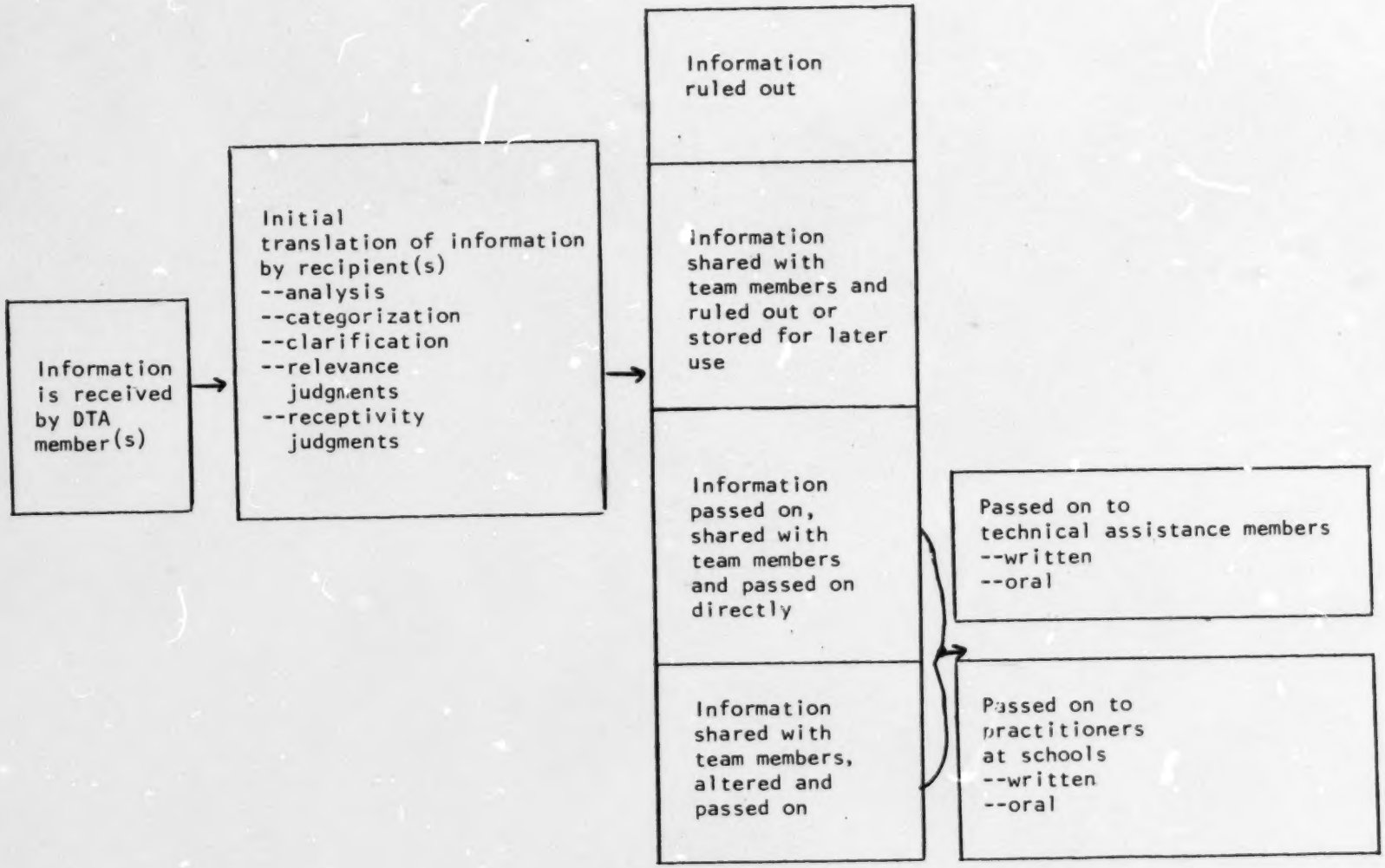
Within the linkage channels people reflect upon information they come to possess and do a variety of things with it:

1. They rule information out as inapplicable.
2. They store information for later application.
3. They channel information directly to a school setting.

We view this process of reflection upon the immediate or potential applicability of information as a translation process. Translation points are places in the linkage process where incoming information is clarified, categorized, analyzed, and judged for potential relevance and receptivity, by the recipients. Judgments are made based on projected usefulness for solving urban public school problems. Translation is one aspect of linkage. The concept of translation speaks to the process underlying the definition component of linkage. The reader will note that if a decision is made to channel information to a school setting, then the translation process as described earlier links the definition with the implementation component of linkage.

The diagram on the following page illustrates both individual and group accomplishment of translation. It shows how translating research knowledge for implementation in schools occurs in several stages. First, information is received by a DTA member or members. Second, it is defined in a translation process and acted upon as stated above. Third, a number of things can happen to the knowledge. It can be ruled out on any of the above bases, such as

STAGES IN TRANSLATION OF KNOWLEDGE FOR UTILIZATION


Information is received by DTA member(s)
Initial translation of information by recipient(s)
--analysis
--categorization
--clarification
--relevance judgments
--receptivity judgments
Information ruled out
Information shared with team members and ruled out or stored for later use
Information passed on, shared with team members and passed on directly
Information shared with team members, altered and passed on
Passed on to technical assistance members
--written
--oral
Passed on to practitioners at schools
--written
--oral

not enough clarity or analysis during the translation process. It can be shared with team members and analyzed further. It can be stored for later use. It can be passed on directly by the recipient individually or by a group, after group consideration. Any of these things can happen when knowledge is worked on by an individual recipient or by a group of recipients.

In our observations on the linkage process to this date we have noted that face-to-face rather than written communication enhances the perception of research materials as useful. We have also noted that some familiarity with the research site, (where information is collected or tested) such as contextual data and "a feel for a place", is crucial in order to maximize usefulness of data. When communications occur in a group, potentially useful knowledge is more likely to be passed on. Also, the information that is passed on is more likely to be found useful to people in school communities.

We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

1. Face-to-face communications about potentially applicable research materials will more frequently result in a perception of that material as useful than will mediated communications.

2. Proposals for implementation of research knowledge which are based upon an understanding of the context of the target school setting are more likely to be found useful by school practitioners, than are proposals without that quality.

3. When potentially applicable research materials are considered in a group rather than individually they will:

    a. more frequently result in a perception of that material as useful.

b. more frequently be passed on for implementation.
c. more frequently be defined as useful by practitioners in schools.

Group consideration of information increases the likelihood of someone in the group being able to personalize the information and then share it with others, through examples of related personal experiences. Often various group members will be able to personalize different segments of the information and then adapt the segments for use as a whole. These hypotheses will be further refined and tested with our data on the internal linkage process.

Our current understanding of the complexity of this process of the linkage between research and practice has led us to make adaptations in individual roles within our project, to create groups which meet to consider potentially applicable information which we receive, and to adopt a variety of other project-wide procedures to facilitate linkage both formally and informally. We expect that our progress in understanding this complex issue will inform our practice.